



THE NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

# Reviewing Stand

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### How Can We Get Greater Competence in Public Office?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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# How Can We Get Greater Competence in Public Office?

**MR. McBURNEY:** Our speakers today are Joseph A. Connor, Regional Director of the 7th Region, with the United States Civil Service Commission; Rollin B. Posey, Chairman of the Department of Political Science at Northwestern University; and Arnold S. Zander, President of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

Now, what is the situation in public office? Is morality in public office at a low ebb? Is it deteriorating? What interpretation do you place on the scandals and alleged scandals in public office, Zander?

## 'Not a New Thing'

**MR. ZANDER:** I certainly do not think that morality in public office is at a low ebb. We all regret the scandals which have been uncovered, but that is no admission that our situation is deteriorating. I would say, rather, that the outbreak we have had is a repetition of some we have had in the past. It is not a new thing.

It is an uncovering, and rather indicates an expectation on the part of people generally that they want a high level of performance in public service, a higher level, perhaps, from public service than other activities in our communities.

**MR. McBURNEY:** Do you accept that analysis, Posey?

**MR. POSEY:** In part, I would agree. I would say that morality is not at a low ebb. I would add to that, however, the statement that the public, right now, is excited about this problem, and so public attention to it is at a climax, which is a good thing.

**MR. McBURNEY:** I was going to ask: Do you think the American people expect, Connor, a higher level of honesty and competence in public officers than they expect in private business?

**MR. CONNOR:** Most decidedly. Let's illustrate. If a man in business or industry makes a profit in a deal on

the side, it's nobody's business, but in government, no matter what you do, or everything that you do, that is everybody's business.

Certainly, there is a tendency on the part of the public to expect more of a public servant than from a person in business or industry.

**MR. POSEY:** And I should add that the public has a right to expect a higher level of integrity and efficiency, too.

**MR. ZANDER:** The purchasing agent in private industry expects to get Christmas gifts from the people from whom he buys, whereas the public purchasing agent had better not accept gifts. Now, that is one indication, I think, of the different standard which the people expect to have followed.

**MR. McBURNEY:** Do you men really believe what I understood Zander to say, that the level of governmental performance compares favorably with past performance? Do you go along with that, Posey?

## 'Above Suspicion'

**MR. POSEY:** I do, indeed. I would say that over the decades—even over the centuries, if one took the very long view—one would find that the level of performance in public office has been getting better and better.

The fact that the public is excited about this problem right now—as they should be—is an indication that the public is insisting that, like Job's wife, public servants be above suspicion.

**MR. ZANDER:** We used to have a night watchman type of government; all the competency we needed was the ability to walk the streets and say "All's well" from hour to hour. At the present time we have multiplied the services of government. We have recognized that to live together in great cities, we must have common services performed by public representatives and public servants, and by the very nature of things we have, and

must have, must continue to have a higher and higher competence.

MR. POSEY: It is more and more important to us, also. Government is costing more and more in our present complex civilization, and as government takes a larger proportion of our national income, it is more important that governmental services be performed well.

MR. McBURNEY: The fact remains, gentlemen, that thousands of the people who are listening to this broadcast have been reading the newspapers and listening to the radio, and they are aware of what they believe to be a pretty serious scandal in public office. Now, are you trying to whitewash that situation? You have been offering extenuation here, but what is the present situation?

MR. ZANDER: I certainly would not whitewash it. I would say that not only thousands on the outside but thousands and thousands in the public service, and probably in the Bureau of Internal Revenue itself are as anxious as any of us are to have this whole mess cleaned up.

I think a lot of our trouble—in Internal Revenue and in a good many other scandals in government over the years—results from a lack of openness in the operation of government. I think we, in this democracy of ours, should recognize that we live as in a fish bowl. Certainly, our public servants should recognize that, and I would go so far as to have our Internal Revenue operation carried on openly, in the public view.

#### 'Errors Are News'

MR. CONNOR: Yes, but let's not overlook the fact, Zander, that if a public employee does anything, or strays from the beaten path a little bit, it becomes headline news, whereas the many thousands of competent and good government employees, if they do something worthwhile, little or nothing is ever heard about what they have accomplished to increase efficiency in government.

MR. POSEY: I think that point is very important, and I'm glad you made it, Connor. There are more than two million civilian employees

of our national government, and so far there has been graft or alleged graft on the part of not more than one hundred of them.

Let's say that this figure went up to five hundred—five hundred out of two million is still a small number, and it is unfortunate that some of our honest public servants are tarred by the same brush.

MR. ZANDER: I think we must make the point that for every public servant who gets involved in these things, there is some interest on the outside which is tempting him, or many interests on the outside tempting him. For every graft taker there is a graft giver, and that cannot be said too often. It is no defense and no whitewash of the public servant, but it is a reflection on the moral code of the rest of us.

MR. CONNOR: I would like to emphasize the point that Zander has just made. For example, if a banker goes wrong, we don't condemn the entire banking world because of it, but if an official of the Bureau of Internal Revenue, for example, goes wrong, the general public is inclined to think that everyone who works in that particular bureau is a grafter and can be corrupted very easily.

MR. McBURNEY: Implicit in what you men have been saying here is a conception, I take it, of the kind of men and women that you would like to see in public service. I wonder if you could make that explicit, Posey?

#### 'Cream of the Crop'

MR. POSEY: Yes. It seems to me that in our governmental service we have the right to expect the cream of the crop. We have a right to expect a level of competence equal to or above that of any other phase of our life.

MR. McBURNEY: Do you think it is reasonable to expect that?

MR. POSEY: I think it not only is reasonable but I think it is necessary.

MR. ZANDER: I think in that case we have to put ourselves in a position to attract the best. It isn't reasonable to expect to get the best unless you set up conditions of employment which will induce them to come into our

service, and I don't think we have done that now.

MR. CONNOR: What would you do, in addition to increasing pay and adding some additional benefits at the present time, to improve government service?

MR. ZANDER: Connor, I'm glad you emphasize the factor of pay, because it is important, and I think it can be proven that, particularly in the higher realms of public service, we pay too little. I think that difficulty increases as we go up in the hierarchy, but it is only one of the elements for competence which will attract people. Certainly, we've got to protect them from the kind of blanket criticism, the kind of charges which have been made of late.

Put it this way: I think if our political life throws up the kind of intellectual barbarian who came up recently and imported methods into our country which have brought into use here the term, "McCarthyism," that a lot of us have got to rise up in protection of the public servants who are attacked by broadside charges.

MR. McBURNEY: Of course, just a minute ago you were objecting to the veil of secrecy that surrounds some of our public offices and public servants. Perhaps that is one way of lifting that veil.

### Income Tax Reports

MR. ZANDER: I think so. I think if we had not required—in Wisconsin—the reporting of income taxes in a way which makes them reviewable by the public press and by citizens, we wouldn't have discovered some of the things that this junior Senator has engaged in.

MR. POSEY: I object to that, I might say, and I hope that Illinois never has the situation Wisconsin does. I think it is a person's own business what his income is, and that one's income tax return should not be made public property.

MR. CONNOR: Well, I think, Arnold, that you don't entirely mean that everything in government should be thrown open to full review and audit. Wouldn't you accept the fact that there are certain functions of government that, for national security reasons, we

would have to keep closed, or secret?

MR. ZANDER: Yes, I certainly would, of course. Anyone would have to recognize that there are areas that we cannot throw completely open, but I repeat that all the openness we can give, within security restrictions, should be given.

For instance, on this matter in the Internal Revenue, where an administrative person can decide on the amount of rebate to be made to a person or corporation—it seems to me that should have public inspection.

MR. POSEY: If an administrative official makes that decision, and he is a person of the highest integrity, then the results are satisfactory, and there is no criticism. I'm afraid that your suggestion is one which is directed at the present scandals in the Bureau of Internal Revenue, but a suggestion which, in my opinion, might produce evils almost equally bad.

MR. ZANDER: No, I think just the reverse. I think until we have openness in the Internal Revenue, we invite scandals, so instead of having my attitude result from a feeling about the present scandal, it is an attempt to defend against this kind of occurrence.

MR. POSEY: If administrative discretion is too broad, then let Congress pass a more specific law to narrow that area.

### 'Less Secrecy'

MR. CONNOR: Do you think by having less secrecy in our government affairs, we would prevent scandals such as we have discussed here from arising?

MR. ZANDER: I think it would be a very definite factor in preventing them, yes. I think they could be discovered earlier if they occur at all, and therefore you would have an element of defense against them.

MR. POSEY: Do you think they would diminish influence, for example, as the anonymous phone call, the unrecorded conversation?

MR. ZANDER: Well, I think it has been a very wise thing to find out that influence was sold, as for instance in the case of our national housing effort,

when a certain Senator took \$10,000 from a housing interest, and probably wouldn't have been discovered if it hadn't been for this income tax report.

MR. POSEY: My only point is that when you require publicity on certain actions, you then force other actions, perhaps, to be even more secret than before.

MR. ZANDER: Are we advocating secret alliances, secretly arrived at, or are we in favor of operating democratically so that people who must pass the laws know what is going on?

MR. POSEY: That is all right with me, for the people who pass the laws to know what is going on.

#### 'Higher Type of Individual'

MR. CONNOR: I agree with Posey. If we get a higher type, more competent individual, the chances are that we would not have to be so concerned about secrecy in government.

MR. ZANDER: Without laboring this point too much, I would say we would get more competence, and maintain it at the proper level, if we operate it more openly.

MR. McBURNEY: Now, how dense is this veil of secrecy that concerns you, Zander?

MR. ZANDER: Well, it will go all the way from the Internal Revenue income tax reports to the fact that in Congress we are getting more and more voice votes. We can't pin the record on our Congressmen as we used to do. I think we should have them out there recording their votes where we can hold them accountable.

MR. POSEY: I think part of this, possibly, is a veil of secrecy, but I also think Zander is unknowingly alarmed at the complexity of our government operation, the size of the mechanism, the variety of functions the government performs. The bigger and more complex a thing is, the harder it is for its operation to get out in the open.

MR. ZANDER: And so the greater the effort must be to acquaint our people with the operation, so that they may judge the ability of their public servants to serve.

MR. POSEY: I grant that, but I still don't want my income, however small, to become a matter of public knowledge.

MR. CONNOR: Then what you are, in fact, saying, is that the general public must take a more active part in governmental affairs today than they have heretofore. There has been too much of a willingness on the part of most of the general public to let someone else take the responsibility for operating our government.

MR. ZANDER: What I am saying, in part, is this: That if a man enters public life poor, serves as mayor or commissioner of a city for ten years, at a meager salary, and leaves public office with a quarter of a million or a million or two million dollars in personal assets, we are inclined to build a monument for that man. In foreign countries—certainly, I can speak personally about Sweden—a man who grafts in public office is ostracized for life. That is their phrase. We don't ostracize them here.

MR. POSEY: Nobody in this country admires a person who gets rich on the public payroll unlawfully. Nobody admires that.

I should like to suggest that possibly we may be overemphasizing this point. I should like to point out, for example, that one of the needs in public service is for a system of supervision that more adequately recognizes the competent person who is doing a fine job.

MR. CONNOR: I agree with you on that, very much, and it seems to me that the time has come when government should enable its public officials, the public employees, to have the same opportunities as business and industry provide for their employees.

#### Assistance in Education

Let me illustrate. A man works in a business or an industry. If he is to be worth anything to that business or industry, quite frequently they will provide the funds, pay his way to take courses in a college or university. Now, what happens on the government level? If the individual wants to get ahead in the world and to become a

better administrator, he has to pay that out of his own pocket.

Certainly, I think that government, if it wants to improve the administration of government in this country, should enable top-flight administrators to go to colleges and universities at public expense, in order to get that education.

MR. POSEY: And here we get back to that matter of pay, too, Connor. When a man in governmental service does an outstanding job as an administrator, business often lures him with offers of more money—he may be making eight or ten thousand dollars a year, and private business will offer him three times that sum to go to work for it.

MR. ZANDER: Now we are talking about the kind of people we want to recruit from the point of view of competence. I think we are getting around to methods of selection and security in employment. I would like to point out that fewer than half of the states of the Union, or approximately half of them, have what we call civil service administration, selecting people on the basis of merit and fitness. In a large number of our states and local communities, we select people purely on the basis of political patronage.

MR. POSEY: I think that is an extremely important point. In our federal service there are about 16,000 persons who are appointed by the President, with the consent of the Senate. These are the persons not in the classified civil service, and I'll wager that if an examination is made of those public servants who have been proven to have betrayed their trust, if such an examination, I repeat, is made, it will show that it is these non-civil service people, these political appointees who have done these heinous things.

#### 'Extend Merit System'

MR. ZANDER: Perhaps we could use the kind of investigation which you suggest to influence more of our legislators in favor of the extension of the merit system of selection in government.

MR. McBURNEY: But even if you set up these merit systems, or extend

them, do the jobs for which you are trying to recruit offer sufficient incentive to the kind of competence you are trying to get, Zander?

MR. ZANDER: I don't think they do now, but I think we can very easily fix it so that they will.

MR. McBURNEY: How would you fix it?

MR. ZANDER: I would say, first, that this very fact of careful selection will be an inducement. It is always an inducement for people to stand high in examinations and to win their spurs properly. Then I think we would have to pay them—people in the higher echelons—more reasonably than we do. And then we ought to give them the rights and freedoms which people have in private service, which in some cases are denied in public service.

For instance, public employees are not covered under federal wage control legislation, or social security, except by recent enactments. In part, they are denied, in many instances, the right of organization which is now generally accepted in private employment.

#### Attitude of Public

MR. POSEY: I should like to suggest, also, that the attitude of the public is important here. We, the people, generally do not look upon governmental employment as employment equally honorable with private business, and as long as we do that, governmental employees must feel, as they meet the public, at least a slight sense of inferiority. That is bad. There is nothing dishonorable about working for the government.

MR. McBURNEY: Why, Posey? Why that attitude on the part of the American people?

MR. POSEY: I think it is in part because we have worshipped in the United States the freedom of private enterprise, the essential excellence of going into business yourself, founding your own firm, and the Horatio Alger story—"from rags to riches."

MR. McBURNEY: I think that is a partial explanation. Might there be some explanation, too, in the feeling that we have a great many overlapping and unnecessary bureaus and

officials in public service who are hanging on by their teeth?

MR. POSEY: Yes, but back before that I would also say that too many people are deluded by that deceptive little phrase that after an election, "to the victor belong the spoils"—spoils politics.

MR. CONNOR: On the point that there may be too many bureaus and agencies, I think we could look at that for a moment and analyze it. There isn't a bureau or agency of government that hasn't been created by the legislative body due to one or more pressure groups, and as long as those pressure groups exist, the legislative body will continue to create more and more bureaus.

MR. McBURNEY: They may have been created by legislative action, Connor, under pressure from various sources, but once created, there are pressures within the bureau or department that keep them there, whether the need for them continues to exist or not.

#### Government Bureaus

MR. CONNOR: There isn't any doubt at all about that. It follows a human tendency that once having created a bureau or agency, the people therein are naturally interested in seeing that the bureau stays alive, purely from an economic standpoint.

MR. McBURNEY: Not only stays alive, but grows.

MR. CONNOR: Sometimes expands, yes.

MR. POSEY: But pressure to continue these activities also comes from the outside. I read with considerable amusement last night of the action of the National Farm Bureau Federation, which went on record as expressing itself in opposition to government bureaucracy. However, they were careful to add to that that they wanted price supports for agricultural prices continued. They wanted soil conservation services continued. They were in favor of all the services carried on by government to benefit agriculture, but they were against the ones to benefit other people.

Of course, it's only human to feel that way, isn't it?

MR. ZANDER: I think there is an element of morals involved, too, in that a lot of critics of government, and people who talk about the multiplicity of bureaus, are themselves representatives of pressure groups, and they will contend vigorously for the continuation of something in their own self-interest. If they are moral in their criticism, they should at least admit that situation, and take steps not to criticize broadside, but to criticize in specific instances, with proof of lack of need for the bureau.

MR. POSEY: I agree to that. I think we need more representation in Congress and in our Administration of the broad general public interest, and we should not conceive of any majority as being made up simply of a collection of special interests.

#### 'Preview Government Functions'

MR. CONNOR: Then what you are saying, Posey, is that we need some sort of a committee or a commission constantly to review the functions of government, to determine which are essential and which have served their purpose and could be eliminated.

MR. ZANDER: I would favor—Posey, if you will excuse me—I would certainly favor the establishment of a permanent Hoover Commission, if we should call it that, or a permanent body to question the need for continuation of certain agencies, and to question generally the operation of our democratic machinery.

MR. POSEY: I don't think anyone could dispute that the creation of a commission which had the task of investigating the efficiency of governmental services would be a good thing, providing the commission is nonpartisan and independent of political pressures of all kinds, a continuing body which would be responsible primarily to Congress rather than to the President.

MR. CONNOR: I would agree on that point, providing that such a commission was made up of representatives from the legislative body and the administrative or executive side, plus representatives from the general public. My reason for making this statement is that I think that since the

legislative body has the control over appropriations, and determines what functions are to be performed by government, it is very essential that the legislative body take a very active part and interest in such a commission.

### Responsibility of Congress

MR. POSEY: Whether there should be legislative participation, or whether the commission should be responsible to Congress, I am not prepared to argue, but I do agree that the proliferation of governmental bureaus and the high level of government expenditure require attention. Both of those factors depend primarily upon Congress.

MR ZANDER: I would emphasize that in our kind of complicated society we are going to have—I don't think there is any way of avoiding it—many public services, which means many public bureaus and commissions. We don't want overlapping agencies, which we have. We should discover them and do something about them.

But we are not going to reduce. Actually, in general, we are just not going to get back to a smaller civilian service in my opinion.

MR. CONNOR: Well, in our total federal budget for the present year there has been authorized by Congress, for purposes of national defense, the sum of \$60,000,000,000, which is about 80 per cent of the entire national budget. There is no question but that as long as national defense takes such a huge total, we are not going to have simple government again.

MR. ZANDER: And in that connection I think we get this problem: if one attempts to criticize the national defense agency, one is apt to be charged with being unpatriotic, but there are such things as military supervision of civilian activities in the defense agency which result in inefficiencies and lack of effective supervision, which we ought not to have.

MR. POSEY: Yes, and over half of all the civilian employees in our federal government are employed in the Department of Defense. It is almost impossible for an individual to build a career of service in the Department

of Defense as a civilian, because the positions at the top are occupied by military people.

MR. CONNOR: Now you have hit the very point I think is important in this discussion, and that is the need for better and greater career service than exists at the present time.

MR. ZANDER: Posey mentioned that before, and I would certainly repeat—from the point of view of state and local governments—that we are under the very strong necessity of establishing a career service at every level of government, which we don't have now, in many places.

MR. POSEY: We haven't eliminated from the American scene, by any means, the idea that a person may be appointed to governmental service on the basis of his political potency, political patronage—appointments and rewards for party service. It seems to me that this kind of thing is at the root of most of the evils about which we have been talking this morning.

### Election Turnover

MR. ZANDER: One time in a large European capital I asked about the turnover after elections, and was told that only four people would change. Well, in this country that kind of situation is unheard of; here we change them by the score, and in some places I have seen, myself, public departments completely cleaned out of people, with an entirely new staff coming in after election.

MR. CONNOR: Well, you wouldn't advocate no change at all after a change in administration, would you, Zander?

MR. ZANDER: No, I would agree to changes in high policy-making positions, but only in those places.

MR. POSEY: I'm not at all sure that I agree with you gentlemen. I would be in favor of virtually no change whatsoever. I can't see why any position under that of departmental head should be a patronage position rather than a merit position.

MR. CONNOR: Most certainly you would agree that there are certain positions of a policy-determining nature that would change hands when an administration changes.

MR. ZANDER: There, of course, we could very easily bog down in the exact definition of the point at which we should break off from patronage positions to career places.

MR. POSEY: The point is that we need to get political patronage out of the public service.

MR. ZANDER: We agree on that. We agree that policy should be determined politically, and administration

should be in the hands of career people. I think we return there to this question of the standing that public service has in the eyes of our people generally.

MR. POSEY: If we did that, we would improve its status.

MR. ZANDER: Decidedly.

ANNOUNCER: I'm sorry, gentlemen, but our time is up.

## Suggested Reading

Compiled by William Huff,  
and M. Helen Perkins, Reference Department,  
Deering Library, Northwestern University.



BEASLEY, NORMAN. *Politics Has No Morals*. Scribners, New York, 1949.

An appeal for greater morality in government positions with concern as to how the government got into the present "fix" and what can be done about finding a remedy.

HYNEMAN, CHARLES S. *Bureaucracy in a Democracy*. Harper, New York, 1950.

Some suggested answers to the question: "What can we do to increase our assurance that the officials and employees who do the day to day work of government will actually provide the kind of government the American people want?"

*American Magazine* 151:30-1, My., '51. "What Are We Going to Do About It?" C. W. TOBEY.

Charles W. Tobey, U. S. Senator from New Hampshire, states that community action must be taken in order to preserve national integrity.

*Atlantic* 188:45-6, Sept., '51. "Bullying the Civil Service." T. ARNOLD.

Competent and efficient government employees are not to be obtained until they are given greater compensating rewards for their services and reason to take pride in their work.

*Catholic World* 174:81-5, Nov., '51. "Dare We Criticize Our Leaders?" J. B. SHEERIN.

The people must be awakened and made to realize that corruption in government can only be destroyed through active protest.

*Christian Century* 68:1182-4, Oct. 17, '51. "Deeper Corruption."

The public must realize that there is not only a corruption in government, but also a corruption of government which needs immediate attention.

*Commonweal* 55:87-8, Nov. 2, '51. "Fighting Corruption." E. S. SKILLIN.

The Douglas Sub-Committee on Ethical Standards in Government points out that local initiative is a necessity if corruption in government is to be eliminated.

*Fortune* 42:73-5, Oct., '50. "Washington's Executive Famine."

There are numerous factors which cause competent business and professional men to be reluctant in accepting a position in the government.

*New York Times Magazine* p. 9, Dec. 4, '49. "Nation's Great Need: Top Officials." S. T. EARLY.

The Deputy Secretary of Defense points out reasons why Washington has a difficult time obtaining competent men for government employment.

*New York Times Magazine* p. 10, Oct. 28, '51. "Big Danger Is Apathy to Corruption." D. L. COHN.

Unethical conduct of government officials and the moral crisis in our government grows because of the apathetic manner with which it is accepted by the public.

*Time* 58:22-6, Oct. 8, '51. "Boyle's Law."

A look behind the political scene at some of the "side deals" carried on by public servants in the shadows of the nation's capitol.

*U. S. News & World Report* 30:15-17, Mr. 30, '51. "Crime, Politics: National Link; Senate Crime Investigation."

Case histories from the Kefauver Committee indicate that crime bosses make "deals" as a matter of standard operating procedure.

*U. S. News & World Report* 31:11-13, Ag. 17, '51. "Breakdown in Morals."

Politicians caught peddling influence, making "deals," selling jobs and generally betraying the public trust are a source of great worry to the U. S.

*U. S. News & World Report* 31:24-33, Oct. 26 '51. "Ethics in Government; Interview H. H. Vaughan."

The verbatim answers of Major General H. H. Vaughan, Military Aide to the President, regarding ethics of government officials.

*U. S. News & World Report* 31:24-30, Dec. 14, '51. "Shake-up in Tax Bureau."

John B. Dunlap, Commissioner of Internal Revenue, in an interview with the editors, tells what the bureau has done to insure greater competence in the future.

*Vital Speeches* 17:716-18, Sept. 15, '51. "Concerning Honor in Public Life; Address, August 30, 1951." H. HOOVER.

Herbert H. Hoover points out some of the evils in government today but feels these will be corrected since "Moral indignation is on the march again."

*Vital Speeches* 17:386-7, Apr. 15, '51. "Moral Standards of Governmental Conduct: Address, March 27, 1951." J. W. FULBRIGHT.

J. William Fulbright, United States Senator from Arkansas in an address to the United States Senate, makes a plea that corruption in government by morally obtuse officials be investigated and remedied.

*Yale Review* 40 no. 4:577-91, [Je] '51. "Ethics in Public Life." A. HECKSCHER

An analysis of ethics in government and what can be done to raise standards of public morality.



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